

Charlie Morrow & bart plantenga: iMMERSEd in iMMERSion 34

Charlie Morrow: So this is Charlie Morrow for Immerse. I'm delighted to be with none other than bart plantenga today. You can hear the results of my new teeth coming into my mouth. You heard me say, sunshine. I got them in just the day I left on the plane and my tongue still doesn't know where to go. I'm going to go around for the rest of my life saying, you're full of shit.

bart plantenga: Whenever I think of false teeth, My parents lost their teeth during World War II because of malnutrition. So I grew up thinking that all parents had false teeth. They both had plates with lots of teeth in them and they would be soaking somewhere in the house, usually in the bedroom, looking at them in a glass, thinking, when am I going to get mine?

They were immersed in a glass of water.

Charlie Morrow: We've been making shows about immersivity now for quite a while and decided to turn the camera and the microphone on ourselves. In the beginning, when I started to work on the book iMMERSE!, when I wasn't sure if I was going to do a podcast, I interviewed Jerome Rothenberg, who said the immersivity he's most touched by, being a poet, is the writer all by themselves.

Writing and creating their own world totally in it, and then that becomes shared. It can be unpacked at any point that anyone can read what has been encoded into that writing. I think you as a writer, me as a composer, we're sitting here creating these. incredible capsules that enable people to slip into those universes.

It's a very old thing, but I think a powerful notion that poet Rothenberg laid on me. It's definitely part of the appeal or part of the inevitable as well.

bart plantenga: I think I've become more aware of the immersivity. When I was 20 or 30, I was immersed, but it wasn't so conscious. I would be immersed without knowing about it.

Now I can step back a step from this and see myself immersed. It's just acknowledged briefly. Sort of like being underwater and seeing the bubbles going to the surface and going, oh yeah, I'm underwater. That's a beautiful image. Do you recall the first time that you found yourself captured by what was going on around you in a way that was totally noticeable, that you somehow entered a bubble for the first time?

Charlie Morrow: I mean, for me as a kid, I was a year old visiting my dad at an army base in Kentucky. And the marching band came by. And the bass drum was so loud I could feel it inside of me and there's nothing I could do to keep it out of me. Anything happen to you very early on that had that power?

bart plantenga: Well, looking at old photos of me on the beach with my parents riding their bikes on the hard sand in the North Sea, that's probably The first time, like in the dunes or in the surf and so every time we go to the beach, we'd go at least once a year for three days and then we rent bikes and we go through the dunes and suddenly my first six years comes back just being immersed in the dunes, which are this kind of sensuround little capsule.

Charlie Morrow: There's no outside world out there. And then you get to the beach. And that would probably be the most vivid experience. Does that initial experience ever come back to you when you visit the dunes again? I mean, do you ever, do you ever recall back to that initial experience? Definitely. I mean, Ninas, Probably heard it three or four times, me narrating why I like the dunes and the beach, the Dutch coasts being unique.

bart plantenga: It's a very, how would you say it? It's a small moment, but somehow it's a big moment at the same time. It's a definite altered state of consciousness.

Well, how do you think that having had that initial experience informed about the gates, so to speak, of immersivity how has that affected you in your work as a writer, as a radio guy, as an editor of communication materials?

I mean, you've been dealing with things that transmit.

bart plantenga: Well, as far as writing goes, I just stumbled upon it. I mean, the act of writing just leads you further into a rabbit hole kind of place. And it's not necessarily influenced by those early experiences, but maybe the serotonin that's released ends up being stimulated from a similar place, you know, the writing and the beach.

I have to say now my radio shows have become more and more soundscape. So the audio part regularly have wave sounds or water sounds and then also birds and beach kind of ambiences filter in and out of a show between songs and it's an integral part of me. I never thought of it that way. I never looked at it and saw myself in a frame on a wall and now.

Working with you on the IMMERSE project, I've been able to step back and actually observe it. We've had a chance to hear the interviews of, of quite a few people now. I'm curious, have you found any patterns that catches your attention? They've all been interesting in one way or another, but some of the ones I enjoyed more are the ones where the interviewee, the person you're interviewing, it actually does go back and go, aha, I remember when I was young.

Charlie Morrow: This happened to me, and then they have a moment of discovery themselves, and then that puts it in the context of their own work. Now, in a sense, you're guiding them to their past, and then that allows them to enlighten some of their process of how they got from way back to here. Have you listened to Thurman's interview?

bart plantenga: No.

Charlie Morrow: Let's see. When I start talking to him, well, it's easy. I'm delighted to talk about immersion. For me, the most complete immersion is death.

bart plantenga: I don't know if death is really an immersion, if you're no longer conscious of that immersion. I don't know.

Charlie Morrow: The death that he envisions as a, in his living practice. Remember the part of the Buddhist practice across, my favorite version of it is called the Cho. It's Tibetan. And in it, you go to a graveyard and you imagine yourself being killed and your body parts systematically or asystematically being eaten by evil spirits.

bart plantenga: That's your favorite form of Buddhism?

Charlie Morrow: Uh, it's my favorite adventure story.

bart plantenga: I remember now. From when I was very young, I had suffocating dreams where I felt like I was being buried or, you know, there was like something on top of me, like a pillow or something like that. And, you know, the old story is if you are falling off a cliff, then they say if you hit the grounds, you actually die, you know, so you have to wake up.

So I was always, you know, at eight or nine years old thinking like, oh my God. If I have this dream again, I have to remember to wake up, otherwise I'll die. That's beautiful, I've, I was told similar things, but surely the dream world and the waking world are part of this sense of immersivity, because I mean you, you know you're in a dream, that's, you're totally immersed in it, and then you have to get out of it if you're going to escape.

Those are the dreams that you're supposed to be able to manipulate. Another immersion was being in the dark and having a transistor radio and turning the transistor radio on, listening to a Yankees game, being scared because I'd gone to the drive in movies with my friend and his parents, and we were seeing Roger Corman films.

I seem to remember it was an outdoor movie. Edgar Allan Poe, maybe Mask of the Red Death is the one I remember the most, but there's a couple others. And being so terrified that I was afraid to go to sleep, so I would just be in total darkness with my transistor radio up to my ear to hear human voices as I guess I eventually fell asleep.

Charlie Morrow: This is who's listening to the radio. That was your life raft. Yeah, it was an immersion that I needed to hold on to the human voice because I was so scared. You know, I thought there was things in my closet and all that stuff, even though it was pitch dark, you know, so. Well, this goes back to the origins of communication.

One of the metaphors that I make in my discussions is that we are in bubbles. of immersion and that there's sea changes as you move between them. So going back to the earliest of those for people would be to start to communicate through language. So at the beginning, what is language and how is that from that, there's a sense of shared feelings or shared thoughts.

Just like the cry of being heard or making a sound, just know how a place responds and using sound as a very elemental part of just as a perception before having a, what we call complete languages, syntax and, and nouns. And then after that, when things got names, I mean, it was so powerful in the old days, people didn't share their names.

Someone know your name, gave them a power over you. There's always been this sense of power in sound and language and then storytelling became a reflection on things or planning for the next hunt or whatever that the whole business of storytelling and relating was part of it. Looking at those early stages and then looking how that relates, for example, to the digitalization of technology that as each technology Completely affects everyone in, in marketing, they call that immersive immersion as well because you, and they use the word penetrate, penetrated that market and they refer to a vertical market. Yeah. As a way of describing the containerization of mass movement.

bart plantenga: Well, for me, I became more conscious of sound having a spatial element or a kind of sonar. So voicing, yelling in a forest or in the nature somewhere and getting your sense of where you are in that forest from where you're yelling, that sound bouncing off of whatever is out there, trees or mountains or whatever.

And that became clear when I was doing my yodeling research. The idea that yodeling is outdoor. It's an old tale that it has to be done outdoors. Although Mozart preferred it outdoors because it was too damn loud indoors. But Where did you learn that, by the way? That was one of his you know That's great.

The thing is that I imagined this. The first recording device was actually a mountain valley where somebody, somebody yodels or yells and that echo comes back to them. So that, that yell has to sit in the air and it's actually recorded in the air someplace and then it comes back to you. And so I like to see that as like the first recorded audio.

Charlie Morrow: Absolutely brilliant, because we refer in almost all media to the word capture. We're all immersed in air or water, and the moment the vibrations come out of us, they're captured by our prevailing atmosphere. So what it is, is it's sequential. So the vibrations form waves. It's a question of the vibrations themselves being passed along and knocking each other and, you know, that we have waves everywhere that make us aware that that's the physical connection between us and, and our world. It is to describe to you and explain visually the effect of cymatic frequencies on texture, structure, water, oil.

bart plantenga: Definitely. I was just reading about silence and they now think that silence cannot really be defined as the absence of sound. In fact, They now think that you know how you become nostalgic if you hear a certain song or a certain sound like a bird sound or a pop song, you become nostalgic and all sorts of images form in your brain.

They've been doing testing and they believe that the silence actually also stimulates, triggers people's memories somehow. So they're thinking that the silence is actually a kind of Silent sound. Can you say that? Well, Paul Simon did. It's good that they're talking about it. You know, what it is, is that we as a, as a species believe in gossip and we're basically able to pick up a bone and chew, chew on it.

Charlie Morrow: And so what's the difference between chewing on a bone, gossip, science?

bart plantenga: In fact, in Amsterdam, it's not as noisy as some other major cities like New York or anything. But if you're going Some place during rush hour. There's a lot of sounds on all levels. So piercing sounds and backgrounds sounds. And then at a certain time around 10 AM, everybody's at work or at school or whatever, and suddenly it can be in parts of Amsterdam and suddenly it's so quiet.

You can actually almost feel it. It's almost like pressing against you on some level or you're, you're somehow made aware of it.

Charlie Morrow: Well, don't you have that experience when you get to the countryside?

bart plantenga: Yeah. Yeah. But it's, it's a visceral feeling. It's not just you're turning off the radio or something like that. It's a thing that presses against you. And then your eyes, then your ears adjust. Apparently, the quieter part of the countryside just becomes the norm and you're no longer aware of it.

Charlie Morrow: So, yeah, that's very thoughtfully described. That's the transition from one sound pressure level to another sound pressure level.

In engineering, we refer to SPL, sound pressure level. Uh, it's one of the standard measurements. Of course, it's affected emotionally by humidity, barometric. Pressure, altitude from sea level winds, prevailing weather, and then back in the brain, the ears, unlike the eyes, do not have lids. And so we have a constant flow into our ears, but our mind then becomes a kind of tool for dealing with...

bart plantenga: Well, earplugs,

Charlie Morrow: Exactly.

bart plantenga: I mean, mental earplugs that you tune things out, but they're now saying that although people learn to live with, you know, if they live in a noisy neighborhood or work in a noisy place, people learn to live with that, but they're wondering whether you're just tolerating it by your brain ignoring certain aspects, but the damaging aspects of too much noise are still entering your system.

So you're still absorbing it somewhere, although your ear is not registering anymore so that you can go on functioning.

Charlie Morrow: Well, in Radiolab recently, a couple of days ago, they were interviewing people who were deaf and who had, say, cochlear implants. In any case, they were able to, because they had a mechanical device, able to turn off hearing. I mean, really turn it off, or turning it on. And I spend a lot of time with my hearing turned off, because there's nothing that is touching me. From the outside from my ears from the outside, absent that input is totally different from, say, a quiet place or covering my ears... one of the people they interviewed said that they chose to become deaf.

bart plantenga: What do you mean chose to become deaf?

Charlie Morrow: I think they would prefer not to have the cochlear implant work.

bart plantenga: In a sense, people who have hearing damage and then get hearing aids and their hearing is better. Pretty good. They have an advantage that they can just click that thing and tune an annoying person out in a meeting or something like that.

Charlie Morrow: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's what is referred to as bionic. My other main Main immersion is in my book, Listful, which is a book of lists that kind of act like poems. There's a list of near death occurrences that I listed, and I've almost died about 12 times. You just go, wow, I could have died then, then, then, then.

bart plantenga: And the first one was when I was six years old. I was probably seven ish. We were at Sandy Hook and which has pretty well known undertow and dangerous currents. And I went, In the water and was playing with some kids. I met there and suddenly the undertow took me away every time I tried to swim towards the shore.

It would bring me to further out where I couldn't stand. And, you know, I was like, struggling and then suddenly. I ended up on the beach somehow right away. The lifeguards had seen that I was struggling and it was a very vivid moment to be laying on a warm beach going, Oh my God, I could have been taken out to sea by these.

Like some evil current and the lifeguards made to the lifeguard stand and lifted me up to the lifeguard that was in the stand and then the lifeguard lifted me up and started blowing his whistle and everybody knew that you're supposed to look at. The child that's being held up is like, is this your child?

Come and get him. That was a very vivid moment of temporary immersion underwater. Working with you on this project, I've become more and more aware of how much immersion means on different levels, like from, from the writing part, but also putting together my radio shows. I'm totally immersed in, in the sound, but also in the.

Fabrication of immersive sounds the way I collage them to make me feel immersed in something beyond everyday reality. So it's like on three or four different levels of immersion going on at the same time. So it's about immersion. You're immersed in the fabrication of immersion and the result is also an immersion. That's all your fault.

Charlie Morrow: Guilty as charged.

bart plantenga: Well, have you ever been, have you ever been in the sea in along the Jersey Shore around late August, early September, the water is so warm, you could be in the water and there was this kind of immersive feeling, which you might think it's a hearkening back to being in the womb.

That does make sense and suddenly it's enveloping you or soothing you to the point where you're relaxed and just laying on top of the water somehow.

bart plantenga: That's a lovely description and I've had experiences both on the Jersey Shore, as you said, I too have been almost swept out to see the Jersey Shore. And but I also remember, as you probably do, baths were an important part of my early life.

I think of it because at this point in my life, I definitely prefer to shower. But there was a time when I would soak in the bathtub, and the temperature was such that I wouldn't know where my skin was.

bart plantenga: You were enveloped by the warm water to the point where you were no longer A physical entity, is that what you're saying?

Charlie Morrow: Yes, that's what it feels like. It's interesting because uh, I think it was Descartes wrote about the mind and the vat. He imagined somehow that the mind could be separated from the body, put into some sort of a liquid and continue on. And I think that that's a another way of describing what everyone experiences when the temperature is just right and you no longer feel that the skin between you and the world exists.

bart plantenga: It's the vanishing of the skin effect. So the water is the same as your body.

Charlie Morrow: Yes, exactly. And the distinction between the two is partially erased. Looking at another sense in that situation, which is the olfactory sense, the smell, we, we know so much by what we smell. And you think about the smell of soil and growing plants and just a positive natural environment or being in the woods and everything being in its place, it smells right.

And then. Within those environments suddenly a smell can alert you to all sorts of problems, you know, suddenly a piece of rotten food or the smell of fear or if you're suddenly in a dangerous situation someplace.

bart plantenga: Our culture, maybe it's just worldwide, maybe it's not just western, it's the sense of sight is so dominant that other senses are given second, second class status. Even hearing is often not considered as much as the visual aspect of something. A small example is when a restaurant is setting up to open and they've got designers, they've got curtains, they've got interior decorators, they've got paint, right?

Everything looks great. And then You realize the acoustics are totally crap. You can't have a conversation with the person you're eating with. Or the music is so bad or loud. And somehow that's less obvious to a lot of people. And, you know, it's probably annoying. We left bars where the music was really bad or too loud.

And I'm not a snob, but the restaurant – beautiful. There's plants, there's beautiful tables and chairs and everything. And then the sound is often not as considered as the visual aspect.

Charlie Morrow: Well, I, I agree completely. And studies have shown in restaurants that certain kinds of environments attract certain types of people. And so same is true with the sound and retail shops. Once you start to have music, it tends to be, for want of a better word, siloed by its being the taste of a certain age group or a certain group of people. That musical preferences are not like sound preferences, although a lot of people cannot stand being in a really silent environment... Refining my thought that these environments are very personal, particular, and can be looked at as group activity, an attractor in marketing or a negative. As you're pointing out.

bart plantenga: I know I've been in bars in many, many, many cities, but in New York, there's a lot of extremes and you know, some of those extremes are fine.

You know, people dressed in extreme ways or whatever, but there is, there is a limit and oftentimes you go into a bar or a cafe and the music is just too loud. I remember living in Amsterdam and going back to visit friends, going to New York. And where do we go? We go to a bar that's super loud. So year upon year, I would lose my voice by the end of my stay in New York. Because it's like five days in a row of going out. And so you think you go to a bar to have a conversation with people you haven't seen for a year, but the bar has imposed an aesthetic or a volume level that prevents you from doing the very thing that you want to do. Which I always found like, really, it's very counterintuitive.

It's, it's not that all that pleasant because you're saying something you have to whisper in the person's ear and that person says, what did you say? Or people just start nodding. Have you ever had this nod where you're in a bar and you're talking and people just start shaking their head? Like I, I am acting like I'm hearing what you're saying, but I don't really hear what you're saying. And we're together. That's, it's so much fun to be together and have hangout, but I'm not really hearing what you're saying. And you keep shaking your head. Yes. And you just think like, can't you just ask the bartender or the DJ to turn down their music so that people can hear each other? No, it's not done.

It's just that they're in control of that situation. And sometimes it's, it's interesting. It can be annoying, but it can also be interesting that people go to places to talk where it's almost impossible to communicate. And we also know that immersion in noise prevents having to interact on a meaningful level, which is probably something that some people actually are seeking in certain club situations, dance clubs, especially.

I mean, you're not there to talk, but that the noise is actually allowing you to immerse yourself in a kind of ignorance. You know what I mean? I'm just distracted by all this noise. So you're falling into a place where the stimulus is all static or noise or beats or whatever, and there's no other.

Charlie Morrow: It's what amusement parks are supposed to do, right?

I appreciate the discussion. I would also recall that where the whole idea came to me to look at immersion through the writing, you know, through the Immersa group and from planetariums. The idea in that case to create immersive entertainment. But beyond that, Kachun Yu, an astrophysicist; it's his thinking that led to our entire discussion here.

He wrote the pre-technological history of immersion. But he also wrote for another installation of mine; I did the history of sound on the earth. With two predictions for the future. The show was in New York at Steelchase and then in London at Arup Engineering Galleries. And Kachun said, we're in a very, very small pocket in the history of the earth where all the stimuli, all the dangers fell into the right balance.

And human civilization evolved right from the Baghdad area and the Indus Valley and Yellow Valley and China and probably someplace in the Americas. Well, such a such a West Africa. Yes, the I think they're called the Halcyon period. And now all of that's coming unduluted. What people call climate change means that we're coming into unstable time.

It had been relatively stable for something like 10, 000 years since the last ice age, I think it was reckoned by Catoon. And that he said, and this was, this was 10 years ago before it kind of reached the popular discussion. And he said that everything that we are as a species evolved in this time when everything was just right for our senses and our survival and where we would have time away from defending ourselves and just simply eating the next meal, that we're going beyond that now.

bart plantenga: It relates to that idea of the yodel caught in a valley as a recorded instance, like in nature before there was recording equipment. And that is sort of what you're, what you're talking about here. This

is an interesting thing. You know, it's how sampling is kind of controversial still. And you know, there's a lot of copyright issues.

I think it's all a little bit ridiculous. I sometimes don't understand if it's note for note a song that you've written. But all the notes are there. I mean, it's just like, you know, using a word in a sentence and somebody saying, Yeah, but I used that word in a sentence that looked a little bit like that sentence, but you say all those words are already in the dictionary.

So it's not like you're inventing new words. You're just putting them in a different order. But how many different orders can there be for those words, you know, before somebody's plagiarizing someone, you know? Well, in the early days, before there was recording equipment, Composers like Beethoven were already sampling.

The first tourism was actually, the first kind of Western tourism, where people actually set out to visit another place to see what life is like in another area, and that was Switzerland. And all the composers went to Switzerland. All of them wanted to hear yodelers and the sounds of the mountains. And what did these composers like Mahler and Beethoven and others do?

They sat in little cafes where Local folk troops would come and they would sit down and they would listen and they would notate the notes that they were hearing these folk singers singing. Say, ah, this is very nice. I want to put this in my next symphony. And so in a sense, they were writing down what now recording equipment does.

And they would put in those those little samples of sounds they heard in the mountains to add a little flavor. They were so immersed in, in the mountain scenery of the Alps and so enchanted, and yet they were busy trying to, before our recording equipment, record what they had experienced.

bart plantenga: That's a very good analogy.

Charlie Morrow: It reminds me too, that prior to mass communication, In fact, prior to mass transportation, people were totally in the bubble of their local environment and languages were totally local and habits were local. And the way people treated each other was local. The law and mores were local. And some of them seem to group around species, so the way we observe it, it's a particular kind of monkey in the way they treat each other.

But humans were bound by certain things and unbound locally to do various things. I mean, I would think about an anthropologist, Colin Turnbull, who was somebody I knew and was an influence on my early life. early life because he let me play the various musical instruments in the Natural History Museum storeroom.

But he wrote a book about the Ik, I-K, an African tribe that he said defied what we understood to be basic human qualities. They didn't love their children, they didn't love each other, and they, you know, Basically, let children raise themselves. Yeah, I think there's been criticism of that book and I think it's probably author's license for the purpose of discussing what he felt was an important issue about how people treat each other.

So I'm not looking at it as science, but I'm looking at it as an example of the basic fabric of human beings, the caring for each other and not caring for each other and the being the most basic immersion, because he said the mother, mothers didn't care for their Right. Their children didn't want to raise them and that seemed to be part of species protection.

Everywhere else the nature wanted to continue the species and so we care for our young so there will be more species.

bart plantenga: Sometimes the downside of this kind of uniqueness of tribes or local people they're seeing they're so immersed in this little cocoon of Specialness, I guess.

Charlie Morrow: Yeah, it's true. On one level, they have they're diverse and interesting cultures, but on the other hand, they can be quite jingoistic.

bart plantenga: I mean, in the languages themselves there's been words for yourself and your people, and then another word for the others. A lot of Native American tribes. There's plenty of places where it's like they're basically 'we, the people and those other beings out there.'

So you're kind of immersed in your own uniqueness, you know, without, I don't know if it's narcissistic or nationalistic, patriotic, whatever. It has to do with this kind of identity. And sometimes that's problematic, I guess.

Charlie Morrow: Well, you know Plato, who actually separated it out. I think as a philosopher, he was quite interesting to address what, it was one of his dialogues, and he addressed this straight up that's called Kratulis.

If you pronounce it in, as I do, American English Kratulis was a wise guy. And he attended one of the sessions where the, you know, the group was around discussing philosophy, right? And the way it goes is Kratulis asked his drinking buddies he says, well, I want to understand how, how language works.

Could you guys, let's, can we talk about that today? He says, sure, let's do that. He says, well, as far as I understand, language comes from like where I was born. I would come from some little place up there outside of outside of here where we have a city. And We talk a little different, and we have words, and, and maybe we only understand them locally amongst ourselves and our kind of extended family.

And everybody says, yeah, that's true, you know, and then they talk about that, and he says, but well thinking about that further, though, I can imagine the effect of your body, you know, your health, and your muscles and the way your body's working, it helps you, you know, the meaning of words is related to the state of your body.

And they go through all of this kind of atomizing of where language might come from. And in the end, Cradley says, well, I guess if I get all this information together I, I'm gonna understand. And the leader of the discussion says basically, shit, no, you've gotta know what's going on. That's a real platonic dialogue.

bart plantenga: From the planet Plato.

Charlie Morrow: From the planet Plato. Well, I think we've come full circle.

bart plantenga: Wow, that was a lot of work. It was.

Charlie Morrow: I think we'll go out and feed the dog and I don't even know. It's great to work with you. It's great to think with you. And our listeners have a sense of our discussion and the fun we have and the critical absurdities and the details we get into in our ability to be infinitely sidetracked.

I think these are all important.

bart plantenga: We're treating him for distraction syndrome, IDS.

Charlie Morrow: IDS. Well, with that, let me thank you. We're coming out from, shall we speak, under the hood and sharing the mind that is in the engine, that has been directing what's going on. For those of us, those who don't know, our project Immersed starts with asking questions.

I interview people, and they are people I've worked with in the field of immersion, and more recently people from the immersion field that now want to be interviewed. And one who's our audio expert and mastering engineer, Sean McCann. Los Angeles clean up these interviews and then Bart gives them sound.

Uh, the beginning was mainly sound from my library, but we're often drawing now from the sounds of the work of the people, but they are scored. And the idea is that it shouldn't just be a discussion and that people would you know, find them worth hearing again if they were scored. And that's bart's work.

He's a master collagist with his own series Wreck This Mess.

So Bart, thank you for today and I shall now pop out of this bubble and go back to Barton, Vermont. Good to be with you, bart. Talk to you soon.

bart plantenga: From Barton to bart.

Charlie Morrow: Barton to bart. See you later.